

Aspen Ranch School 2000 Dry Valley Road Loa, Utah 84474

September 9, 2005





Utah State Office of Education 250 East 500 South P.O. Box 144200 Salt Lake City, Utah 84114-4200

THE REPORT OF THE VISITING TEAM REVIEWING

Aspen Ranch School

2000 Dry Valley Road Loa, Utah 84474

September 9, 2005

UTAH STATE OFFICE OF EDUCATION

Patti Harrington, Ed.D. State Superintendent of Public Instruction

DIVISION OF STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT AND SCHOOL SUCCESS

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FOREWORD

The major purpose of the accreditation process is to stimulate school growth and improvement so as to increase student achievement.

In these efforts, the school staff makes a comprehensive evaluation of the school's programs, operations, and results. The school determines how actual practices align to stated objectives and resulting outcomes. It is a three-phased evaluation: (1) self-evaluation, (2) on-site evaluation by an external team of educators, and (3) implementation using units of the evaluation to improve the school by effecting thoughtful change.

The evaluation, September 9, 2005, was conducted because of the school's desire to ensure quality education for all students in the school, and to increase student achievement.

The entire staff of Aspen Ranch School is commended for the time and effort devoted to studying and evaluating the various facets of the total program and to preparing the materials used by the visiting team. The excellent leadership given by Lisa Lewis, Academic Director, is also commended.

The staff and administration are congratulated for their desire for excellence at Aspen Ranch School, and also for the professional attitude of all members of the group, which made it possible for them to see areas of weakness and strength and to suggest procedures for bringing about improvements.

While these recommendations may be used to solicit financial support to acquire some of the materials, equipment, and services needed to carry out a more effective program, it is even more important that the faculty and administration utilize them as they continue to evaluate and modify course offerings and administrative and classroom procedures to more dramatically increase student achievement at Aspen Ranch School.

Patti Harrington, Ed.D. State Superintendent of Public Instruction

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ASPEN RANCH SCHOOL

ADMINISTRATION AND STAFF

Administrative Staff

Matthew Alexander Jeremiah Jackson Becky Brown Chris Davis. Sharon Torgerson Ramola Harding Cheryln Taylor Academic	Program Director Admissions Director Accounting Director Administrative Secretary Quality Assurance Quality Assurance	
Lisa Lewis	Registrar Secretary	
Faculty		
David Chappell Jan Brown David Jacobsen Kade Morrell Carrie Mitchell Deina Peterson Cristin Martin	Library, Special Education Teacher, Art Teacher, Science Teacher, English Teacher, Physical Education and Health	
Academic Support Staff		
Gina Aders Mike Bray Anna Salazar Trina Pace Lindy King	Substitute Substitute Substitute	

Clinical Staff

John Acker	
Cory Aders	Therapist Team 3
Phillips Beehler	
Damon Bryan	Therapist Team 1
Paul Flack	Therapist Team 6
Ashlie Harris	Therapist Team 5
Bruce Jenkins	Therapist After Care
Jeanette Morrison	Therapist Team 4
Scott Peterson	Equine Therapist
Matt Pettit	
Mike Peyton	Therapist Team 7
Sharon Shoemaker	
<u>Med</u>	lical Staff
Kenzi Peterson	RN
Bobbie Brown	RN
Carla Coleman	RN
Jennie Jackson	EMT/CNA
Tawnee Ellett	EMT/CNA
Blaine Pierce	RN
Iris Failner	EMT/CNA
Marianne Turner	RN

ASPEN RANCH SCHOOL

MISSION STATEMENT

The Mission of Aspen Ranch School is to provide quality, individualized instruction to help students build self-confidence, develop critical thinking skills and discover academic potential in a consistent, nurturing, and safe environment in order to become well-rounded individuals who are positive contributors to our global society.

BELIEF STATEMENTS

Aspen Ranch administrators, teachers, staff and personnel believe:

- 1. Every student in our school is important and shall be actively involved in their learning process. Decisions are made with the student's best interests in mind.
- 2. All students have unique potential and develop self-confidence by celebrating their successes and internalizing individual accomplishments.
- 3. The effective school is an interdisciplinary, cooperative learning environment that includes experiential education where meaning is more important than memorization.
- 4. Teachers enhance their personal and professional lives and enrich students' learning experience by modeling life long learning, developing mentoring relationships with students and through collegial bonds.
- 5. Maintaining low teacher/student ratio enhances learning opportunities for each student.
- 6. Interdepartmental communication is vital to success.
- 7. The therapeutic values of respect, responsibility, healthy relationships, and integrity are important in our classroom environments and staff interactions.

MEMBERS OF THE VISITING TEAM

Ralph P. Vander Heide, Ph.D., Consultant in School Accreditation, Visiting Team Chairperson

Judith H. Vander Heide, M.S., Consultant in School Accreditation

VISITING TEAM REPORT ASPEN RANCH SCHOOL

CHAPTER 1: SCHOOL PROFILE

Aspen Ranch opened in Loa, Utah, in the summer or 1995 as a place of growth and transition for at-risk youth who were returning from wilderness programs. At that time the school had only one student. Now, ten years later, Aspen Ranch is a licensed residential treatment center for adolescents ages 13-17. It has strengthened the academic program and developed a fully integrated therapy component. Eight teachers deliver the educational program along with educational support staff and multiple residential, therapeutic, and medical staff members, as well as a maintenance team. Several buildings have been constructed for use as offices, classrooms, and dormitories. The campus includes a school building that houses a library and new computer laboratory, in addition to a new indoor riding arena.

Loa is located on the edge of alpine and desert country some 20 miles from Capitol Reef National Monument. Therefore, outdoor activities including trail rides, ranch chores, and biology lessons are an integral part of the curriculum and extracurricular activities. The equine program offers opportunities for learning respect, self-discipline, and many other skills that can be applied to the students' lives and help them with their personal behavioral issues.

Students are allowed to enroll year round. Aspen Ranch requires a minimum stay of 180 days, though the average length of stay is 9 months. The average student population is 80. Seventy-five percent of student families are private pay, 14 percent are paid through insurance, and 11 percent are funded by school districts through AlB or NPS funding. The school accepts student from across the United States and has enrolled students from other countries including Canada, Switzerland, and England. However, the largest percentage of students comes from California, followed by Texas and Virginia.

The family portion of the program is geared toward providing therapeutic education and support, improving communication, and advising families about ways in which a student may successfully reintegrate back into the home, school, and community. During the student's stay at the Ranch, families receive regular updates, including weekly reports that evaluate their child's progress. Families are encouraged to attend orientation and quarterly workshops at the Ranch, where therapeutic work is done with the family group.

The educational philosophy at Aspen Ranch is based on the belief that academics are therapeutic. The primary goal is to use the educational program as a key part of a student's individual personal development. The best way to accomplish this, according to the school's philosophy, is to provide a rigorous academic program that is tailored to meet the needs of each individual student. Self-esteem and

confidence, it is claimed, are outgrowths of academic accomplishment.

A class in horsemanship is required of each student as the foundation for more extensive use of the school's 30 horses in therapeutic applications and for activities such as cattle drives and trail rides.

a) What significant findings were revealed by the school's analysis of its profile?

The school has discovered significant findings about each student, since each is carefully profiled in order to individualize instruction to the extent possible and to help students with their psychological and behavioral issues. The Visiting Team notes that Aspen Ranch well portrays the school population, environment, curriculum, and other relevant information about the school, with emphasis on its mission, philosophy and educational and rehabilitative direction for each student.

The school's analysis of the profile includes the identification of its strengths and limitations, and it provides a description of the "big picture" about the performance of the school. Profile information was used in drafting the school's improvement plan.

The Visiting Team notes that in preparing the profile the school followed the guidelines of the National Study of School Evaluation (NSSE) and the NSSE handbook, *School Improvement: Focusing on Student Performance* as well as the Utah accreditation handbook, *Collaborating for Student Achievement*.

b) What modifications to the school profile should the school consider for the future?

The Visiting Team commends the profile information that is given. The data given includes assessments (achievement, exit, observation, participation, and perception) and artifacts (external communications, materials, organizational documents, and records). Data on all aspects of the program are clarified. Limitations as well as strengths are identified.

The school is reminded to continue to put its best foot forward and to profile thoroughly.

CHAPTER 2: THE SELF-STUDY PROCESS

a) To what extent has the school community engaged in a collaborative self-study process on behalf of students?

The faculty and staff at Aspen Ranch believe that parents are an integral part of the program and an essential element of the therapeutic process. They, along with all stakeholders, are part of the highly collaborative process.

b) To what extent does the school's self-study accurately reflect the school's current strengths and limitations?

This has been described in Chapter 1 above.

CHAPTER 3: INSTRUCTIONAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS

Aspen Ranch's desired results for student learning (DRSLs) are as follows:

- Use critical thinking skills
- Take responsibility for personal actions
- Show effective use of communication

School staff members engaged in a thorough procedure for determining the DRSLs. The staff and SIP team used the "Survey of Goals for Student Learning" published by the National Study of School Evaluation, as well as observation of student achievement and educational research, to determine the learning needs of students.

The Visiting Team observed that several indicators of student achievement are given for each DRSL so that progress can be measured. An example of one indicator is "Identify and define problems" (Critical Thinking).

Shared Vision, Beliefs, Mission, and Goals:

a) To what extent did the school facilitate a collaborative process to build a shared vision for the school (mission) that defines a compelling purpose and direction for the school?

Aspen Ranch School is to be commended for its collaborative effort. Stakeholders met regularly as part of the self-study process. The beliefs, mission, and DRSLs were a result of the collaborative approach. The mission statement does indeed describe a compelling purpose and direction for the school. It was written (and modified from the original) after stakeholders reviewed surveys and current objectives.

Stakeholders appear to understand that they must work their way through problems of instructional practice at ever-increasing levels of complexity and demand.

b) To what extent has the school defined a set of beliefs that reflect the commitment of the administration and staff to support student achievement and success?

This has been well accomplished (see the list of beliefs at the beginning of this report). The school beliefs address key issues pertinent to effective decision making and policy development. It appears that the implications of the school's belief statements and the level of the school's conviction to act upon the beliefs have been considered prior to finalizing the list of beliefs.

c) To what extent do the school's mission and beliefs align to support the school's desired results for student learning (DRSLs)?

They align as recommended by NSSE. The Visiting Team observed that the analysis of student learning needs takes into account the profile data and related assessment and evaluation measures of student learning. The expectations for student learning reflect meaningful and appropriately challenging goals. They are free of jargon, and all stakeholders can understand the clear and concise language.

Curriculum Development:

a) To what extent does the staff work collaboratively to ensure the curriculum is based on clearly defined standards and the Utah Core Curriculum (with inclusion of the Utah Life Skills)?

The curriculum is based on the Utah Core Curriculum, and teachers work together to meet and modify the core as needed for the school's unique population. The Utah Life Skills are a part of the curriculum. Standards for appropriate learning for varying abilities guide the development of curriculum.

b) To what extent does the teaching staff work collaboratively to support the development of a curriculum that focuses on the school's desired results for student learning?

See above. All faculty members concur in focusing on the school-wide DRSLs as part of their teaching assignment. All staff members seemed to be conversant with the DRSLs, the mission, and the school beliefs.

Quality Instructional Design:

a) To what extent does the professional staff design and implement a variety of learning experiences that actively engage students?

Teachers have learned that they must be creative and innovative with this student population, and to help with the rehabilitation of students as well as their academic needs. Teachers are very much aware that instructional time must be protected and appropriately allocated to support learning. The Visiting Team encourages the teaching staff to continue and to improve this endeavor.

b) To what extent do the professional staff and leadership provide additional opportunities which support student learning?

The students engage in several appropriate "additional opportunities," such as sports, equine therapy, and community service, as well as activities that directly improve and enrich their learning through expanded use of time, facilities, and instructional resources.

Quality Assessment Systems:

a) To what extent has the staff developed classroom or school wide assessments based on clearly articulated expectations for student achievement?

The development of assessments of student learning is based on a clear definition of the type of achievement to be assessed and the performance standards for evaluating the quality of students' achievement. Assessment is both formative and summative. It appeared to the Visiting Team that assessments are fair, equitable, creative, and varied. Teachers attempt to individualize assessment.

Leadership for School Improvement:

a) To what extent does the school leadership promote quality instruction by fostering an academic learning climate and actively supporting teaching and learning?

The Academic Director is a competent educational leader who understands the importance of promoting and fostering quality instruction. She encourages decision making that is data-driven, research-based, and individualized. She, along with other administrators (see the list in the front of this report), provides skillful stewardship by ensuring management of the organization, operations, and resources of the school for a safe, efficient, and effective learning environment. She monitors the work of the teachers and checks on the progress of the students.

The school leadership promotes quality instruction by fostering an academic learning climate and actively supporting teaching and learning.

Community Building:

a) To what extent does the school foster community building and working relationships within the school?

As noted throughout this report, community building is part of the ethos of Aspen Ranch. Positive and productive working relationships are established among students, teachers, support staff, and administrators.

b) To what extent does the school extend the school community through collaborative networks that support student learning?

As noted above, the school participates in community projects and service learning, which is an integral part of the program.

Culture of Continuous Improvement and Learning:

a) To what extent does the school build skills and the capacity for improvement through comprehensive and ongoing professional development programs focused on the school's goals for improvement?

This is commendably accomplished at Aspen Ranch School.

b) To what extent does the school create conditions that support productive change and continuous improvement?

The school is committed to progressive change. Of course, a principle concern is to help these youngsters with their personal problems in order that they may better achieve academically.

CHAPTER 4: NORTHWEST ASSOCIATION OF ACCREDITED SCHOOLS (NAAS) STANDARDS I-XI

Standard I – Educational Program

The school meets all four sections of this standard. The educational program is aligned with the mission statement and beliefs. The Visiting Team observed that the vision for the school has been collaboratively developed (see Chapter 3). The

instructional and organizational practices, as well as the policies and procedures, support the desired results for student learning and prepare students to succeed in a culturally diverse, democratic society. The program of studies meets the requirements of the state.

Standard II - Student Personnel Services

All three sections of this standard are met. Personnel services are designed to give appropriate, systematic assistance to students as called for in the subsections of the requirements. The assigned personnel for guidance includes a minimum of one full-time person for each 400 students enrolled. (The school has approximately 80 students.)

The primary objective of the counseling/therapy program is to promote and enhance the academic and personal development of students and to prepare them for post-high school experiences. Therapy helps them to understand impediments to academic achievement that have occurred in their lives due to their behavioral issues.

Standard III - School Plant and Equipment

The nice ranch buildings in their lovely setting provide for a variety of instructional activities and programs, and incorporate aesthetic features that contribute to a positive educational atmosphere. This provides for the health and safety of students and all school faculty and personnel. This standard is met.

Standard IV – Library Media Program

The school meets the five sections of this standard. The school library media program is a resource for literacy, information, and curriculum support. It contributes to the achievement of the DRSLs. A certified library media teacher advises and helps with library improvement. Sufficient funds are provided each year to meet the library/media needs of students and teachers. Ongoing improvements of the library should be a concern of all stakeholders. The Visiting Team was been pleased to witness the improvement of the library during the last five years.

Standard V - Records

This standard is met. Student records are maintained, handled, and protected in the best interests of students and parents. Students and parents have the right to access personal student records and are ensured the privacy of such, as guaranteed by federal legislation.

Standard VI – School Improvement (This is addressed in the self-study.)

The five sections of this standard are met. The school improvement plan focuses on the total school rather than each of the separate components within the school. Systematic analysis of data regarding the performance of students has been incorporated into the comprehensive school improvement process, as has ongoing examination of instructional practices. The plan is updated and adjusted each year in alignment with perceived needs. The school leadership is very much aware that improvement is a process, not an event, and urges the faculty to generate internal accountability.

Standard VII – Preparation of Personnel

This standard is met. All professional personnel are in compliance with the licensing requirements of the state of Utah and are endorsed or properly, temporarily exempted for the subjects they are teaching. Since this has been an area of concern in the past, the school is advised to be very mindful of this standard.

Standard VIII - Administration

This standard is met. The administration of Aspen Ranch School provides educational leadership, supervises and coordinates programs, and carries out the necessary and required administrative procedures.

Standard IX - Teacher Load

This standard is met. The total number of students instructed by any one teacher in any one grading period does not exceed numbers set by the Utah State Office of Education and/or NAAS.

Standard X – Activities

This standard is well met. As noted, the school supports a range of activities that supplement and augment the basic instructional program by providing additional enriching experiences for students, consistent with the school's mission and beliefs. Attention is paid to providing equal opportunities. The equine program, with the new riding arena and specialized "equine therapists," is especially commendable.

Standard XI – Business Practices

This standard is met. The school is financially responsible. Proper budgetary procedures and generally accepted accounting principles are followed for all school funds. The school's advertising and promotional literature are completely

truthful and ethical. The school is one of many Aspen Corporation Schools in the USA.

CHAPTER 5: SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT EFFORTS – ACTION PLAN

a) To what extent is the school-wide action plan adequate in addressing the critical areas for follow-up?

It appears to be adequate and understood by all stakeholders. There is school-wide commitment to the action plan, and follow-up procedures are sound. The Visiting Team assumes that the plan will achieve the desired outcomes. School personnel intend to change and modify it as needed. The school followed the suggested format of NSSE.

The recommended format is to have complete alignment (profiling—establishing beliefs—mission statement derived from beliefs—analysis of how the school is operating—establishment of DRSLs based on profiling, mission, and beliefs—an action plan that addresses the DRSLs).

CHAPTER 6: MAJOR COMMENDATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF THE VISITING TEAM

Commendations:

- The Visiting Team commends all stakeholders for the preparation of the thorough self-study.
- The Visiting Team commends all personnel and students for their hospitality and cooperation with the Visiting Team.
- The Visiting Team commends all personnel for their honesty concerning the academic programs at Aspen Ranch, and for their willingness to improve.
- The Visiting Team commends all school personnel for their enthusiasm and apparent devotion to improving the lives of the students (i.e., for their commitment to the mission statement and beliefs).
- The Visiting Team commends the administration, therapists, and faculty for the practice of holding regular meetings to discuss all aspects of the ongoing program of the school.

- The Visiting Team commends school personnel for providing noteworthy activities in service learning.
- The Visiting Team commends all school personnel for fostering a nurturing yet goal-directed atmosphere.
- The Visiting Team commends the teachers for the examples of competent teaching that the Visiting Team observed.
- The Visiting Team commends the owners of Aspen Ranch for maintaining a beautiful environment that is most conducive to learning.

Recommendations:

- The Visiting Team recommends that the school profile in future self-studies offer even more information and data, including follow-up studies on students who have completed their stay at Aspen Ranch.
- The Visiting Team recommends that all stakeholders continue to expand the library with appropriate materials.
- The Visiting Team recommends that all stakeholders remain committed to a process of continuous improvement.
- The Visiting Team recommends that the Aspen Ranch School's commitment to professional development be specific to identified needs.
- The Visiting Team recommends that in the future the administration include students in focus groups that prepare the self-study.
- The Visiting Team recommends that the administration continue to explore methods of direct teaching.

Lastly, the school is reminded that accreditation provides reasonable assurance about the quality of opportunities available to students who attend the school. A primary purpose of accreditation is to protect the public trust. Accreditation promotes voluntary self-regulation. It is a means of showing confidence in a school's performance (i.e., showing that both quantitative and qualitative standards have been established). An ultimate objective of the self-study and accreditation process should be that schools institutionalize the process of reflective inquiry and thereby become internally responsible for the maintenance of standards—even the creation of standards.

The Visiting Team has witnessed ongoing and dynamic improvement at the school over the last five years, which has positively influenced teaching and learning, and it is anticipated that Aspen Ranch School will continue the process of self-evaluation and ongoing improvement. Sharing, learning and growing are evident at this school.